

*Circumventing the Cold War: The parallel
diplomacy of economic and cultural exchanges
between Western Europe and Socialist China
in the 1950s and 1960s**

An introduction

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This special issue brings together historians with expertise on China and Western Europe who have the explicit intent of bridging the existing gap between two parallel strands of scholarship, that is, Europe in the Cold War and the history of Socialist China, and combining the different perspectives and approaches of international, diplomatic, business, and cultural historiographies. The contributors' lively interaction and close collaboration has been the key to the conceptual development of a broader view of the relations between West European countries and Socialist China in the early decades of the Cold War, as well as of China's policy towards the capitalist world before the Reform and Opening era.

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So far, historians working on relations between the West and the People's Republic of China have long considered American president, Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in February 1972 as the starting point of the normalization process—'a week that changed the world'.¹ The dominant narrative maintains that American–PRC official relations would only be established at the end of the decade as a result of the actions of the Carter administration and Deng Xiaoping's 'Open Door' reforms. This argument more or less explicitly implies that Mao's regime had curbed previous Chinese efforts to link with the West. The historiography presents a wide variety of assessments during the years of the centrally planned economy. The two most polarized extremes include those who award some merit to Mao's experiment, and those who assess Mao's policies as damaging to China's economy.² Only Mao's mitigated attitude in the chaotic final years of the Cultural Revolution and the Chinese leadership's need to form new international allies in order to have an alternative to the Soviets offered Nixon a fertile terrain for his move. Due to a vast American historiographical production on the subject and to a long-established trend to apply the Cold War bipolar paradigm to the whole of international relations, most existing scholarship acknowledges the prominence of American diplomacy while relegating the role of West European states to that of followers.³

Yet Nixon's opening to China had a mere geostrategic dimension in America's relationship with the Kremlin, and the actual official and substantial development of Sino-American relations only started

¹ Hamilton, K. A. (2004). 'A "Week that Changed the World": Britain and Nixon's China Visit of 21–28 February 1972', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, vol. xv, no. 1, pp. 117–135.

² Among those who have more closely analysed Mao's contribution to China's economic growth, see: Bramall, C. (1993). *In Praise of Maoist Economic Planning: Living Standards and Economic Development in Sichuan Since 1931*, Clarendon Press, Oxford. Among those who more vocally deny any merit to Mao's centrally planned economy, see: Deng, K. (2012). *China's Political Economy in Modern Times: Changes and Economic Consequences, 1800–2000*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York. Other scholars have taken a more balanced approach by highlighting the successes as well as shortcomings of Mao's Socialist-planned economy. See: Brandt, L., Ma Debin, Rawski, T. G. (2013). 'From Divergence to Convergence: Re-evaluating the History Behind China's Economic Boom', *IDEAS Working Papers Series*, No. 175/13; Naughton, B. (2007). *The Chinese Economy. Transitions and Growth*, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

³ Pollack, J. (1991). 'The Opening to America', in MacFarquhar, R. and Fairbank, J. K., *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 15, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Yahuda, M. (1983). *Towards the End of Isolationism: China's Foreign Policy after Mao*, MacMillan, London.

at the end of the decade. In contrast, by 1972, West European countries had all recognized the PRC, exchanged ambassadors, and developed substantial relations with China. In addition, the European Community opened political and economic relations with the PRC in 1974; the first trade agreement was signed in less than a year, and a remarkable level of exchanges was reached shortly afterwards.⁴ All of the above signals the limits and inaccuracy of the historiography centred on the United States. Moreover, it clearly suggests that the Chinese leadership's strong interest in opening contacts with capitalist countries, more specifically those of Western Europe, existed well before the Deng era.

This special issue of *Modern Asian Studies* is the result of the editors' and authors' collaborative research efforts, which sprang precisely from their dissatisfaction with the existing historiography. It was born in the corridor and coffee debates that ensued. In 2011, we conceived of two joint research projects which aimed at analysing relations between Western Europe and the PRC during the decades preceding the early 1970s thaw. We secured triennial funding from the University of Padua and the Ca' Foscari University of Venice respectively.⁵

The research group's diverse expertise and interests brought us to focus on Socialist China and the main four European countries: Britain, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Italy. The latter is a welcome addition to post-1945 international historiography, which tends to overlook Italy when studying the main West European countries, whether that is a result of a lack of linguistic skills or scant access to Italian ministerial archival sources. To those who speak Italian, though, other archival and primary sources are available and, as shown in the related articles of this special issue, can provide rich evidence for a fruitful analysis.

⁴ On the European Community's China policy, see Chenard, M. (2012). 'Seeking Détente and Driving Integration. The European Community's Opening Towards the People's Republic of China 1975–1978', *Journal of European Integration History*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 25–38; Chenard, M. (2012). 'The European Community's Opening to the People's Republic of China, 1969–1979: Internal Decision-making on External Relations', PhD thesis, The London School of Economics and Political Science.

⁵ The two joint projects were: 'At the roots of European recognition of the PRC, 1960–1974. National and transnational actors and strategies', coordinated by Carla Meneguzzi Rostagni, and funded by the University of Padova; and 'Italy, Europe, China. Economic, political, and cultural relations in the Cold War years (1954–1971)', coordinated by Guido Samarani, and funded by Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

We are aware that the decision to devote half of the special issue to Italian case studies might meet with some objections; here we present the rationales behind this choice. First, it goes without saying that the joint research projects at the origins of this publication received funding from two Italian universities, that all the authors involved are Italian, and that half of them—notably the Ca' Foscari group—are renowned experts in this field of Sino-Italian studies. Second, Italy can hardly be considered a small European power, whatever the criteria adopted. In particular, Italy was one of the six founding member states of the European Communities, and by the 1960s was already a remarkable economic power in Europe. Italy's renowned 'economic miracle' was possible thanks to a political vision that combined strong state intervention in the economy with support from emerging, successful entrepreneurial typologies.⁶ Third, and more important, Italy is a most relevant case study when analysing Cold War Europe. Much like West Germany, post-1945 Italy relied heavily on the United States for military protection. Although the Italian state was not defeated and dismembered, and in fact was a founding member of the Atlantic alliance, its foreign policy was closely aligned to American dictates for many years. The reason for this lay not only in Italy being geographically situated at one of the borders of the two opposing worlds, that is, the Socialist East and capitalist West, but also in the essential fact that the country experienced the Cold War confrontation at home, as a result of the presence of the most powerful and strongly rooted Communist Party in the West (the Partito Comunista Italiano). This peculiar feature placed the country's politics and policies under the special surveillance of the United States throughout the Cold War era, meaning that any attempt by the Italian government to open up to Socialist countries—and hence to the PRC—was placed under close scrutiny and subjected to high pressure from Washington.⁷ Yet, at the same time, the Italian political panorama included some of the

⁶ Amatori, F. (2011). 'Entrepreneurial Typologies in the History of Industrial Italy: Reconsiderations', *Business History Review*, 85 (Spring), pp. 151–180.

⁷ Cold War constraints also directly affected the democratic life and domestic politics of the country. Until the end of the Cold War, an unwritten agreement—the so-called *conventio ad excludendum*—existed among Italian political parties to keep the PCI out of government by means of coalition building. The coalitions, however, were opportunistic and unstable, which in turn led to continual governmental crises. The historiography, especially in Italian, is vast. For a political science approach, see, for example, Pridham, G. (1988). *Political Parties and Coalitional Behaviour in Italy*, Routledge, London and New York.

most enthusiastic advocates of détente and multilateralism such as Socialist, Pietro Nenni; Christian democrat, Giovanni Gronchi; and Liberal, Gaetano Martino. They were also quite vocally in favour of recognizing the PRC or, at least, developing economic relations from the mid-1950s onwards. Particularly worth mentioning is Ferruccio Parri, former partisan and founder of the left-wing movement, *Unità Popolare*, who played a pivotal role in the creation of the *Centro Studi per le relazioni economiche e culturali con la Cina*, an across-the-board group of intellectuals, members of parliament, and economists who shared a strong interest in China.⁸ In addition, beyond politics, there was Enrico Mattei, president of state-owned energy company, ENI, who was internationally renowned for his robust policy towards the oligopoly of the big powers in oil industry. His vision for a strong role for Italy in the post-war international economic system also targeted Socialist China. Last, but not least, though considered peripheral by the other (more successful) imperial powers, throughout the twentieth century, Italy forged relations with China which gave birth to and nourished Italian society's lively economic, academic, and cultural interest in that country. For instance, rich economic and political ties existed between Italy and China by the 1930s, when Chiang Kai-Shek and Mussolini had some ideological proximity.⁹ After 1949, Sino-Italian relations developed thanks to a 'new' and diversified panorama of leftist intellectuals, artists, and associations who facilitated contacts and bridge building between the two countries before official recognition.¹⁰

Relying on the research group's expertise, we determined to offer a comparative view of how business and politics in each main West European country related to one another on the question of effecting

⁸ Samarani, G. (2014). 'Roma e Pechino negli anni della Guerra fredda: il ruolo del Centro studi per le relazioni economiche e culturali con la Cina', in Meneguzzi Rostagni, C. and Samarani, G. *La Cina di Mao, l'Italia e l'Europa negli anni della Guerra fredda*, Il Mulino, Bologna, pp. 93–117.

⁹ Godley, M. (1985). 'Lessons From an Italian Connection', in Fung, E. and Pong, D. (eds), *Ideal and Reality. Social and Political Change in Modern China, 1860–1949*, University Press of America, London, pp. 93–123.

¹⁰ The most extensive account of relations between Italy and China during the twentieth century is Samarani, G. and De Giorgi, L. (2011). *Lontane, vicine. Le relazioni tra Cina e Italia nel Novecento*, Carocci, Roma. See also Andornino, G. and Marinelli, M. (2013). *Italy's Encounters with Modern China*, Palgrave, London, which combines historical contributions with cultural studies, economics, and accounts of public servants and advisers spanning over 150 years from the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy (1861) to date.

rapprochement with Socialist China. In addition, we decided to use the example of one country as a lens through which to broaden our examination to include actors other than business and government, such as artists, intellectuals, and youth organizations. For the reasons explained above, we chose to take Italy as a multifaceted test case, confident that other scholars would have a similar enthusiasm to explore other national cases in a similarly diverse way.

Our common research framework was based on three fundamentals. First, we endorsed the new Cold War historiography's approach which challenges the idea of states being more than mere clients of either the Soviet Union or the United States. Dobson, Cain, Førland, and Jackson have extensively explored transatlantic frictions, proving that the West European allies strongly disagreed with the American administrations on the issue of economic containment.¹¹ Yet such a major and innovative contribution to the scholarly debate has not yet had a real influence on the study of China during the Cold War. Two of the most engaged observers of China's affairs—David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda—have long maintained that throughout the Cold War the relationships between West European states and China were heavily constrained by bipolarity and that their economic interaction was reduced to the bare minimum.¹² Overall, only in the last decade have experts in China's history, both within and outside the PRC, devoted increasing attention to the Cold War period. Nonetheless, the limited number of works written by Chinese scholars on China's foreign economic relations during the Cold War maintains that the United States exerted its supremacy over the other countries of the Free World, and dedicates very little attention to the analysis of the role of NATO allies.¹³ The most authoritative account

¹¹ Dobson, A. P. (2012). *US Economic Statecraft for Survival 1933–1991: Of Embargoes, Strategic Embargoes, and Economic Warfare*, Routledge, London; Cain, F. (2007). *Economic Statecraft During the Cold War: European Responses to the US Embargo*, Routledge, London; Førland, T. E. (1991). 'Selling Firearms to the Indians: Eisenhower's Export Control Policy, 1953–1954', *Diplomatic History*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 221–249; Jackson, I. (2001). *The Economic Cold War: America, Britain, and East–West Trade, 1948–1963*, Palgrave, New York.

¹² Shambaugh, D., Sandschneider, D. and Zhou, Hong (eds) (2007). *China–Europe Relations. Perceptions, Policies and Prospects*, Routledge, London and New York; Yahuda, M. (1994). 'China and Europe: The Significance of a Secondary Relationship', in Robinson, T. and Shambaugh, D. (eds), *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

¹³ Cui, Pi (2000). *Meiguo de lengzhan zhanlve he Bali tongchou weiyuanhui, Zhongguo weiyuanhui 1945–1994* [U.S. Cold War Strategy, COCOM and CHINCOM], Dongbei

of Socialist China's diplomatic relations published to date—Chen Jian's book—only briefly mentions Western Europe when analysing the 1970s.¹⁴ Zhang Shuguang offers a very useful conceptualization of Chinese authorities' success in shaping and then integrating the economic dimension into its policy, which was aimed at building a new international role for the country. However, his narrative of China's opening to the world relies upon Nixon's decision to launch a dialogue with the PRC as the starting point.¹⁵

Second, we intended to focus substantially on the actions of non-governmental actors in the development of Sino-European relations. In the last decade, several edited volumes have addressed the non-diplomatic dimension of the Cold War.¹⁶ Although loosely linked together, most of the essays contained therein contribute to challenging the orthodox narrative of the Cold War. With regard to China's cultural relations during the Mao years, few works are as fundamental as Nicolai Volland's.¹⁷ His detailed analysis of exchanges in the literary field prove that cultural ties served to 'forge ideological communities' in countries belonging to the same ideological camp. He has furthermore highlighted the role of cultural ties across the blocs, which were especially constructive once other avenues of exchange were closed off. Also worth mentioning are Passin's and Brady's works, which add to our understanding of how the Communist Chinese government dealt with foreigners' short and long term visits.¹⁸ In

Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, Changchun; Deng Feng (2001). 'U.S. Trade Control Policy Toward China and Sino-Japanese Trade Relations, 1948–1958', *Dongbei Luntan*, no. 3, pp. 29–33; Gong Xuping (2004). 'On the Minor Modifications of U.S. Trade Embargo against China During the Johnson Administration', *Dongbei Shida Xuebao*, no. 3, pp. 64–70.

¹⁴ Chen, Jian (2001). *Mao's China and the Cold War*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.

¹⁵ Zhang, Shuguang (2014). *Beijing's Economic Statecraft During the Cold War, 1949–1991*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

¹⁶ Mitter, R. and Major, P. (eds) (2004). *Across the Blocs: Cold War Cultural and Social History*, Frank Cass, London; Mooney, J. E. P. and Lanza, F. (eds) (2013). *Decentering Cold War History: Local and Global Change*, Routledge, New York; Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat (eds) (2009). *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity and Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York; Zheng, Yangwen, Hong, Liu and Szonyi, M. (eds) (2010). *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds*, Brill, Leiden.

¹⁷ Volland, N. (2008). 'Translating the Socialist State: Cultural Exchange, National Identity, and the Socialist World in the Early PRC', *Twentieth-Century China*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 51–72.

¹⁸ Brady, A. (2003). *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People's Republic*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Oxford; Passin, H. (1962). *China's Cultural Diplomacy*, Frederick A. Praeger, New York.

particular, they show that the PRC government considered the foreigners coming from either side of the Iron Curtain to be highly useful to its attempt to extend China's international influence—what Brady calls the system of 'officially nonofficial contacts' deployed at the people's level. Overall, the abovementioned analyses strengthened our decision to look at non-official actors. As to economic and business history, Catherine Schenk's recent scholarship has demonstrated that, for instance, Hong Kong provided a crucial link between Socialist China and the capitalist world: in the 1950s the British colony became an important financial centre, an active trade partner, and the first source of remittances for mainland China.¹⁹ Although this analysis is of incomparable value, it does not properly consider the political aspects of these relationships. Conversely, Christine Loh's work offers a good explanation of the political rationale behind China's openings to businessmen, but leaves many of the actual operations unexplored.²⁰ Yoshihide Soeya's book on Sino-Japanese trade is a very good example of how to integrate a diplomatic history approach with relevant insights on the role of private Japanese businessmen.²¹ On the contrary, Thierry Robin's analysis of the role of business in Sino-French diplomacy shows very little sympathy for the economic argument.²² In this special issue, we knit together the political and business economic aspects into a coherent framework of analysis.

Third, and with regard to the above, we aimed at detecting and analysing the connections between these non-governmental actors' activities, their national government's policy towards Socialist China, and the latter's policy towards Western capitalist countries. From a European perspective, we know that national roads to recognition of the PRC took different paths: from the early initiative of the United Kingdom in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War to the spectacular decision of de Gaulle's France in January 1964, to Italian recognition in 1971 and, eventually, West Germany's official

¹⁹ Schenk, C. R. (2001). *Hong Kong as an International Financial Centre: Emergence and Development, 1945–1965*, Routledge, London; Schenk, C. R. (2005). 'Economic Relations Between Hong Kong and China, 1945–51', in Lee Pui Tak (ed.). *Colonial Hong Kong and Modern China*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, pp. 199–218.

²⁰ Loh, C. (2010). *Underground Front: The Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong.

²¹ Soeya, Y. (1998). *Japan's Economic Diplomacy with China, 1945–1978*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

²² Robin, T. (2013). *Le Coq face au Dragon, 1944–1964. Deux décennies de relations économiques franco-chinoises*, Droz, Geneva.

move in 1972. Recently, a few historians—equally unhappy about the American-centred literature—have started to analyse these West European national experiences in detail and, more importantly, to embed them within the broader framework of international relations: for instance, Garret Martin’s work on de Gaulle’s France and Martin Albers’ article on the early 1970s blossoming of West European official relations with the PRC are remarkable.²³ However, little research has been done on the years and activities that came before, and indeed prepared, the *normalization* process between China and such West European governments. If we scratch beneath the surface of official diplomatic relations, we can find evidence that the major West Europeans countries’ rapprochement to the PRC had begun already in the 1950s. Moreover, this special issue provides a more detailed look at the Chinese side of the equation thanks to the expertise of De Giorgi, Graziani, and Zanier, whose first-hand knowledge of Chinese primary sources constitutes the backbone of their articles.

Finally, we all applied the methodology of historical studies, with particular reference to the gathering and subsequent close-reading analysis and contextualization of primary sources. The latter are as diverse as archival records of state ministries, political parties, individuals, firms, and associations; diaries, letters, and travelogues; and newspapers and journals published at the time. A special mention must be made of the issue of Chinese primary sources. The history of the PRC’s diplomatic relations suffers from chronically limited access to archival sources due to the current leadership’s sensitivity regarding that data. Although the documents for the period 1949–66 have been declassified, the Chinese authorities only give access to a selection of this material, each time applying restrictions to some particularly sensitive papers. This approach applies to the most relevant archives, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese Communist Party Central Archives (*Zhongyang dang’an guan*). At the local level, arrangements can be more flexible, but this flexibility pertains also to attitudes towards the declassification criteria: what is accessible in a certain area at a given time might not be so in another area at another moment. Generally speaking, after a period of openness in the early 2000s, scholars are encountering ever-increasing difficulties

²³ Martin, G. (2008). ‘Playing the China Card? Revisiting France’s Recognition of Communist China, 1963–1964’, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 52–80; Albers, M. (2015). ‘All Paths Leading to Beijing? Western Europe and Détente in East Asia, 1969–1972’, *The International History Review*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 219–239.

in more recent years, and Chinese documents related to 'high' politics remain difficult to access. Yet researchers can benefit from the work of research institutions such as the Woodrow Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project, the National Security Archives, and the Harvard Project on Cold War Studies, which are proactive in collecting, translating, and publishing online some PRC archival materials. Italian-speaking scholars also have access to a number of declassified documents that the PRC government donated to the Italian government, and which have been collected and collated by the eminent Professor Ennio Di Nolfo a few years ago.²⁴

The intellectual origins of this special issue stem from a variety of scholarly approaches, each of which points to the relevance of Socialist China's relations with Western Europe well before the slow recovery from the Cultural Revolution and the early approaches made by the United States. We know from Eckstein's landmark book, *Communist China's Economic Growth and Foreign Trade* (1966), that in the second half of the 1950s the volume of trade between China and non-Socialist European countries increased more or less continuously, reaching a peak in imports in 1958 and in exports in 1960. Mitcham's work offers an unprecedented compilation of data on actual trade operations, though his explanation of China's domestic rationales for business with the West has neither the standing nor the depth of a historical analysis.²⁵ We also know of the debates that took place among the leadership about the speed of privatization, collectivization, and industrial growth, thanks to Hua-yu Li's analysis of the disputes that took place among the leadership on how to implement Stalin's Big Push, as well as to Lardy and Lieberthal's book on Chen Yun's alternative strategy, and to the more recent *China Quarterly's* special mini-section on the 1955 high-tide of Socialism.²⁶

Building on these established alternative readings of the economic and social reality of the Mao years, this special issue intentionally

²⁴ Di Nolfo, E. (2010). *La normalizzazione delle relazioni diplomatiche tra la Repubblica italiana e la Repubblica popolare cinese. Atti e documenti*, (Italian and Chinese edition), Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli.

²⁵ Mitcham, C. J. (2005). *China's Economic Relations with the West and Japan, 1949–79: Grain, Trade, and Diplomacy*, Routledge, London and New York.

²⁶ Li, Hua-yu (2006). *Mao and the Economic Stalinization of China, 1948–1953*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham; Lardy, C. and Lieberthal, K. (1983). *Chen Yun's Strategy for China's Development: A Non-Maoist Alternative*, Sharpe, New York and London; Howe, C. et al. (2006). 'High Tide Symposium', Special mini-section, *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 187.

intertwines international, economic, business, and cultural history approaches in order to come to a more dynamic and detailed portrait of relations between Western Europe and China during the first two decades of the Cold War era. First, it demonstrates that in the decade from the mid-1950s to the onset of the Cultural Revolution, increasing exchanges with non-Socialist European countries provided China with a path to modernization which was alternative to the 'Soviet style' experience. Furthermore, throughout the 1950s and until the mid-1960s, the connections with Western Europe functioned as levers for a cautious but determined reconfiguration of hierarchies in the Socialist world that were meant to both attenuate Soviet control and place China in a cultivated and complex network of global relations.

Second, the articles presented here prove that relations other than diplomatic were carefully opened and nurtured between the four main West European countries and Mao's China, from the mid-1950s onwards. More specifically, the authors identify some of the economic, cultural, and individual political actors involved in the development of relations with the PRC and reveal the ways in which they operated to both promote such relations and influence government policy towards China. The articles reveal that, from the mid-1950s onwards, relations between the four main West European countries and Socialist China grew ever more enmeshed in multiple webs of trade, financial, and cultural exchanges. Although still solidly in place, the Cold War framework was being challenged by several European civil actors such as firms, business, finance, non-governmental organizations, and cultural institutes, as well as by some distinguished politicians, who all forged bilateral patterns of interaction and cooperation despite the absence of official relations and the constraints of Western Cold War embargo policies. Moreover, the articles demonstrate that several economic actors often operated behind the scenes on behalf of, or in close connection with, their national government, to which they provided a more discreet (and face-saving) channel than the traditional diplomatic one.

Indeed, the articles by Peruzzi, Romano, Bernardini, and Meneguzzi Rostagni analyse the relationship that existed and developed between governmental/political actors and national economic actors with regard to the issues of recognition, contacts, and exchanges with Socialist China. They specifically focus on the use of commercial and economic contacts that were made in Britain, France, West

Germany, and Italy respectively to bypass Cold War constraints and assess these governments' complex relationship with the United States. These articles also bring to the fore an important element of European economic competition in reaching out to Beijing, and indicate the latter as a main driving force for a change in national political attitudes. As the only country to have formal relations with Beijing after the establishment of the Socialist regime, the United Kingdom conceived of its relations with the PRC as an exception worth making to its unquestioned loyalty towards the Atlantic alliance. Roberto Peruzzi shows that the Foreign Office placed great emphasis on preserving Britain's world power status and its leadership of the Commonwealth. More importantly, he proves that the British government went even further, as it was keen to exploit Britain's privileged position to promote British financial and economic interests and make Hong Kong a crucial hub for Socialist China's international trade. Whitehall was indeed the driving force in easing the Western embargo towards the PRC; yet, as Peruzzi notes, the United Kingdom indirectly facilitated other West European countries' fast-increasing trade and economic cooperation with Beijing, ultimately losing its unique position as the key political and economic interlocutor.

The first two countries to follow this path were France and West Germany, although the two differed significantly as to the kind of relationship that developed between business and government when contacts with the PRC were at stake. Angela Romano proves that in the mid-1950s, when the international climate discouraged steps towards official relations, the French government started to use commercial diplomacy as a means to open up unofficial diplomatic channels with the Chinese. She acknowledges that French businessmen and members of parliament were proactive in pursuing trade and economic cooperation with Socialist China and were key players in effecting a gradual change of government policy. Yet, she demonstrates, this private sector-born commercial diplomacy was soon espoused—and promoted—by the French Foreign Ministry as a means to prepare the ground for political recognition of Mao's regime. At the same time, the French government sided with the British to push for a new Western stance on the matter. Romano also argues that the growing annoyance at the White House's obstinate Cold War policy towards the PRC and the increasing concern regarding West Germany's fast-rising share in economic and trade relations with Socialist China provided the French government with additional rationales for adopting a more welcoming stance towards Beijing.

By contrast, as Giovanni Bernardini's article shows, the West German government was much more cautious, to say the least, towards business initiatives in Socialist China. West Germany's official policy strictly followed the timing and dictates of the White House: only after Nixon's visit to China gave an unequivocal green light to Bonn did the latter open relations with the PRC. Bernardini demonstrates that the main German business actors accepted the division between the economic and the political spheres imposed by Cold War constraints and the country's total reliance on the United States for security, but also saw loopholes in this arrangement that could be exploited. By focusing on the actions of the Eastern Committee of German Economy—a semi-official organization recognized by the government—Bernardini proves the ability of the German economic associations to develop important trade and cooperative relations with the PRC along an autonomous path, thereby circumventing the West German government's firm non-recognition policy.

Quite impressively, there was more room for political debate and manoeuvring in Italy, the other West European country tightly bound to American protection. The dominant narrative argues that the Italian government had to wait for instructions from Washington before moving to recognition of the PRC. Carla Meneguzzi Rostagni's article definitely qualifies this interpretation. Relying on evidence from the Italian Foreign Ministry and from private archives of both Aldo Moro and Pietro Nenni, Meneguzzi Rostagni shows that since the mid-1950s important politicians worked to promote economic exchanges between Italy and China; this activity was linked to the concurrent initiatives of economic actors like Dino Gentili and Enrico Mattei. She also reveals that the Chinese question made an appearance on the agenda of Italian parliamentary debates and government programmes as early as 1964. Ultimately, thanks to Nenni's and Moro's diplomatic action, Italy recognized the PRC before the decision of the United States to reach out to China.

Meneguzzi Rostagni's article challenges the long-held assumption that Italian politicians refused to open to Socialist China; it also provides a preface to this special issue's multifaceted analysis of the process of rapprochement between Rome and Beijing. The articles by Zanier, De Giorgi, and Graziani prove that this rapprochement owed as much to the action of Italian non-governmental actors as to the accurate use that Chinese authorities made of contacts and exchanges with them.

Valeria Zanier's article, which focuses specifically on the paramountcy of the chemical and energy sectors and the early achievements of the Italian company, ENI,²⁷ in the Chinese market, reveals the existence of West European industrialists' special interest in catering to China's high market potential by as early as the mid-1950s. More importantly, she demonstrates that this met with favour on the Chinese side. Beijing was eager to get a diverse range of Western offers to choose from, as this would help the PRC become a strong and independent country. Zanier provides evidence of the fact that, despite economic and political constraints, PRC decision makers were perfectly aware of prices, commercial strategies, and state-of-the-art technology of the time. Furthermore, she proves that, as early as the 1950s, Chinese leaders were pursuing the opportunity to evaluate alternative markets to those of the tightly constraining alliance with the Soviet Union and its closest allies.

Laura De Giorgi adds to the argument that, from the second half of 1950s, PRC decision-makers looked at Western Europe as a fertile terrain within which to develop new economic and cultural relations, and to project a new image of an independent Socialist state. Soon after 1949, the main aim of the PRC's cultural diplomacy was integration with the Soviet Union and the Socialist bloc via participation in networks and events managed by Soviet institutions and centred on Eastern Europe. However, in the second half of 1950s, direct relationships were established between Chinese cultural institutions and Western left-wing associations, intellectuals, and artists. Taking Italy as a case study, she explores how Socialist China's revolutionary cultural identity was understood and received in Italy in the years 1954–1958, when the first fissures appeared in the international Socialist bloc. De Giorgi also offers an assessment of the prospects of Sino-Italian cooperation in the field of arts and literature as a way to bridge the East–West political and ideological divide.

This intentional search for building bridges across worlds that the Cold War set against one another, and for clearly presenting the PRC as a non-confrontational Socialist state is also evident in Sofia Graziani's article. She demonstrates that the Chinese Communist Party also made early efforts to institutionalize youth exchanges as

²⁷ Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi is the National Hydrocarbon Holding in English.

a tool to enhance the new regimes' foreign relations. Relying on unexploited archival material and memoirs of former political leaders, she explores the interactions between Italian left-wing party-affiliated youth organizations and China's youth league in the 1950s. Through this case study, Graziani sheds light on the role played by international left-oriented youth organizations in propelling the understanding of the 'other', and proves that the PRC's youth external affairs (*qingnian waishi*) was an integral component of the broader 'people's diplomacy' designed to influence Western public opinion in favour of Socialist China.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue offer the first historical assessment of the relations between the four main West European countries and the People's Republic of China before the period of détente of the early 1970s. The findings of this special issue question the degree of constraint the Cold War placed upon governments other than the superpower, and shed new light on the role played by Western Europe in the Cold War. That the West European countries' foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s was limited by Cold War constraints and, more specifically, by loyalty to Western solidarity and the United States has long been taken for granted. The articles here presented do not dramatically alter such overall assessment, yet they qualify the degree of constraint imposed by the Cold War's straitjacket as well as its chronological extent by showing that great latitude existed for interaction and exchanges in fields other than official diplomacy. More specifically, the authors of this special issue bring to the fore the activities of civil actors in circumventing the Cold War barriers defined by the superpowers, be they political, economic, or cultural. The articles detail the domestic debates and constraints, as well as the national recipes and roads towards Socialist China. At the same time, they reveal a more sophisticated and diverse picture of the Chinese government's attitudes towards non-Socialist countries during Mao's years. In so doing, they offer a fuller mapping of the actual web of Sino-West European contacts and exchanges; they contextualize Cold War bipolarism in the contradictory web of domestic interests and of options available to governments; they reframe the relevance and impact of long-term patterns of Sino-European relations and prove the worthiness of taking a longer perspective for understanding China's ambition to become a world player. Indeed, when engaging with contemporary China, scholars struggle to frame a fruitful and coherent relation between the extreme complexity of China's domestic reality and the country's often

oversimplified projection to the outside world. To quote an eminent scholar in China's foreign affairs, '[China] is an enduring empire that increasingly behaves like a modern nation state'.²⁸ This special issue aims to contribute to the debate on China's long path towards modernity and globalization.

²⁸ Westad, O. A. (2012). *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750*, Bodley Head, London, p. 441.